Forgotten Basics That Enable Decisive Action

■ By Maj. Gen. Doug Chalmers and Maj. Craig A. Falk

Soldiers assigned to the 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, scan the area for enemy threats during a National Training Center rotation at Fort Irwin, Calif., on Jan. 15, 2018. Decisive action training exercises at the center help units to remain versatile, responsive, and available for contingencies. (Photo by Spc. Joseph DeLuco)

To support decisive action battles, logisticians will need to mitigate risk at the operational level by relearning the principles of anticipation, improvisation, and survivability.

The quote from Field Marshall William Slim, "Hit the other fellow as quick as you can, as hard as you can, where it hurts him the most, when he ain't looking," captures the timeless truth of decisive action: speed and mass win battles. It also infers the need to be able to hit again and again and again, if required, to secure the win.

This is important to note because history indicates that most large-scale campaigns flow between the decisive and attritional phases. The victor normally is the side that has the ability to make those transitions quickly and sustain them.

The Decisive Action Fight

The industrial age of warfare brought armies of scale onto the field. They used immense amounts of materiel that had to be carried over long supply networks from a nation's industrial base.

Today we are at the intersection of the industrial age and the information age of warfare. New technologies like additive manufacturing, enterprise resource planning systems, and alternative sources of operational energy may well reduce our reliance on those supply networks and far-away industrial bases, but the need for mass in the right place at the right time is unlikely to change.

Over the past 15 years, the Army has been able to fight its wars in well-established theaters supplied from a defensive or stability operations posture using large stockpiles that are reminiscent of the old magazine system. Maneuver commanders were rarely logistically constrained, and logisticians took little risk.

Years ago, the Army distilled its hard earned experience of decisive action from World Wars I and II and the Korean War and developed eight principles of sustainment. Because of a lack of punishment by a near peer, our recent experiences have subconsciously reduced the importance of three of those hard-earned principles: anticipation, improvisation, and survivability.

The National Training Center and the Joint Readiness Training Center do an outstanding job of teaching and providing experience for these principles at the brigade level. But at the division and operational levels, experience in anticipation, improvisation, and survivability has atrophied. Sustainment officers at these levels must relearn these three principles of sustainment so that they can better embrace risk.

Taking risks with logistics is a key part of being decisive. The history books are full of armies that were "tidy" but late. This does not mean commanders should heedlessly gamble on the success of an operation; rather, they should be willing to accept risk after properly understanding and mitigating it. To do so, the relationship between the maneuver commander and the logisticians needs to be very close and very honest.

The logistics engine determines the pace (freedom of action), distance (operational reach), and permanence (endurance) at which an army can operate. Following the initial establishment of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army fought from a defensive or stability posture. This posture allowed for the great build-up of supplies at places like Logistics Support Area (LSA) Anaconda in Balad, Iraq.

Such massive LSAs had every national stock number imaginable and far exceeded the intent of nonpermanent contingency basing. The LSAs negated or reduced much of the concern over the distance of our lines of communication or the longevity of operations.

From these military superstores, we could effectively support multiple requirements for multiple missions with little concern about disruption to the established operational logistics disposition. They also allowed the relationship between the maneuver commanders and their logisticians to weaken.

In hindsight, this is unsurprising. With such large quantities on hand, little thought needed to be given to

anticipating or understanding the maneuver commander's next move. Any operation could be supported.

Anticipation

The foundation of unified land operations is built on decisive action, mission command, and seizing, retaining, and exploiting the initiative. Anticipation is the ability to foresee operational requirements and initiate actions that satisfy a response without waiting for an operation order or fragmentary order. It is about achieving the ability to attack at just the right time and place.

Maneuver commanders set the conditions for agility and rapid action that produce definitive results when they keep their logisticians close and empower them to anticipate. This is critical because logisticians need more lead than anyone else to ensure that they are able to support a commander's decision.

Empowering logisticians can be done through detailed planning and carefully crafted friendly forces information requirements (FFIRs). But more importantly, it demands a close relationship between the maneuver commander and his or her senior logistician. The maneuver commander must understand the FFIRs and develop an understanding, through the senior logistician, of the force's culminating point.

The logistics commander must create his or her own decision points, which must be carefully nested within the maneuver commander's decision points. This nesting enables decisions about resources to be made at the right time to accomplish the key sustainment tasks required to set the right conditions for decisive action.

One of the best historical examples of a close relationship between a commander and logistician that enabled anticipation occurred in World War II when Lt. Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army logisticians anticipated his decision points and started setting conditions for them. His staff recognized the need to change their axis of advance to relieve pressure on the surrounded 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge.

This anticipation enabled Patton's army to shift within such a quick timeline that the idea was laughed at by other senior Allied officers when it was first briefed to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. But Patton was confident, and he knew his logisticians had set the conditions to facilitate this decision through reallocation of resources and a little improvisation.

Improvisation

Following the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the lines of communication and LSAs in those campaigns became fully established and stayed that way for more than a decade. Support units traditionally fell in on a well-developed, well-used, and refined concept of support.

Sources of supply were fully established, and leaders were able to develop schedules to use limited strategic transportation assets efficiently. Occasionally the logistics posture was moderately disrupted by natural disasters, but never enough to necessitate a change in campaign direction or the development of improvised solutions at the operational level.

Improvisation is the ability to adapt sustainment operations to unexpected situations or circumstances affecting a mission. It includes contracting, creating, inventing, arranging, or fabricating what is needed from what is available. It will be essential in any future peer-to-peer fight as the Army builds mass at speed in a contested environment.

Since 2014, a broad coalition of nations has worked together to de-

Soldiers assigned to the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, conduct maintenance during a rotation at the National Training Center on Aug. 20, 2017. (Photo by Pfc. Carlos Cameron)

feat the Islamic State group. More than 70 countries participate in the operation while the Iraqi military and Syrian Democratic Forces take the lead on the ground.

This situation presents numerous sustainment challenges. The Iraqis do not have a completely developed sustainment network, and the Syrian Democratic Forces coalesced from much smaller, local groups.

In order to fill these gaps, coalition logisticians have improvised solutions, frequently leveraging operational contract support to enable partners to build mass at speed. These solutions bought back time and resources for the commander and allowed the coalition to take the fight to the Islamic State group earlier, faster, and harder.

Decisive action is full of Carl von Clausewitz's "fog of war," especially during the initial phases of any campaign or during high-operating tempo periods or phases. During decisive action, the operational logistician is asked to find fast and effective solutions to evolving and unforeseen requirements.

Quick estimates must be made to determine what can be brought and what can be purchased or contracted locally. The sustainment commander must apply operational art to visualize complex operations and understand what is possible at all levels from all potential resources. The added benefit of thinking laterally and locally is that it provides resilience by adding depth and survivability to the concept of sustainment.

Survivability

In recent years, at the operational level, there has been marginal concern over enemy interference with our sustainment concept. We have used the same nodes for nearly 17 years on a consistent schedule and have become comfortable as a result. Survivability became a principle through hard, bitter experience as our previous adversaries would always go after our logistics framework.

Survivability touches all aspects of protecting personnel, weapons, supplies, and routes. It demands dispersion and redundancy planning,

Soldiers assigned to the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, conduct a sustainment meeting during a rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2017. (Photo by Pfc. Carlos Cameron)

as stocks will be lost and routes and modes will be denied. It also requires greater focus on our deception activities.

Operational logistics moves telegraph the capability and intent of friendly forces to the enemy; after all, our near-peer adversary's priority intelligence requirements will often be our FFIRs.

During the Gulf War, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf refused to allow senior logistician Maj. Gen. William "Gus" Pagonis to shift sustainment assets into the western desert when he wanted. Schwarzkopf knew if this happened too early the enemy would guess the operational concept and have time to reposition its forces to counter the now famous "left hook."

Survivability of an operational logistics footprint is therefore essential to maintaining our endurance during decisive action. The next adversary's ability to fight in depth and across multiple domains will exceed the experience gained in the past 16 years. We often take for granted our air supremacy. We should not.

The deputy assistant secretary of defense for program support, Gary Motsek, believes logisticians will have to operate from multiple smaller footprints to conceal and confuse the enemy's ability to attack sustainment assets. Logisticians may need to rely on the use of redundant sustainment capabilities, including multiple nodes, modes, routes, and alternate support plans. This redundancy mitigates risk by presenting multiple logistics assets for the enemy to target.

Regardless of what action is taken, the survivability principle forces logisticians to understand the risk presented by the operational environment and the enemy so that we can take proper mitigating steps and accept the risk.

In April 1982, Argentina invaded and occupied the British Falkland Islands. The Argentines believed the British would respond diplomatically because a military response would be too difficult since the Falkland Islands are in a very austere region more than 8,000 miles away from the United Kingdom.

The world believed that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was taking a gamble by ordering military intervention, but it was a calculated risk. British logisticians improvised a solution by using civilian merchant ships to supplement the military ships to transport the men and materiel required for the campaign.

The logisticians remained integrated in tactical planning as the task force sailed to the South Atlantic. This integration led them to reorganize the supplies on ships so they could be unloaded in the order they were needed during the refuel stop at Ascension Island.

Not everything went well for the British during the campaign. The Argentine air force proved very capable and prevented air superiority from being established. This led to a number of ships, some carrying critical supplies and helicopters, being sunk or destroyed. The loss of these supplies and capabilities altered the logistics plans, which in turn altered the flow of the campaign.

Because the logisticians were fully integrated into the campaign's design and execution, these losses were absorbed and plans were adjusted without any loss in tempo, enabling the task force to continue to hit the enemy hard and fast.

The Argentines believed it would take at least six months for British troops just to reach the Falklands, but the British won the war in less than 75 days largely because of the logisticians. They had followed Field Marshall Slim's maxim by delivering just enough mass at speed.

But, as Maj. Gen. John Jeremy Moore, the British land forces commander, put it, "It was a very close-run thing." Morale, training, discipline, and logisticians who were trusted by commanders to manage finite resources made the difference.

In order to properly support tomorrow's decisive action battlefield, logisticians will need to embrace and mitigate risk at the operational level. This can be achieved in part by relearning the principles of anticipation, improvisation, and survivability.

Sixteen years of supporting a well-developed theater has left these principles atrophied and often ignored by both maneuver commanders and logisticians. Bringing these principles back will help us embrace and mitigate sustainment risk, not just accept its presence. Getting this right will increase the speed with which we win the next conflict, saving blood and treasure.

Survivability touches all aspects of protecting personnel, weapons, supplies, and routes. It demands dispersion and redundancy planning, as stocks will be lost and routes and modes will be denied.

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